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A West African Female Perspective on Polygyny. A Thematic Analysis

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Date: April 2018

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## ABSTRACT

This study had the intention of exploring the perspectives of Malian women towards the topic of polygyny. This was achieved through a mixed methodological approach; ethnographic interviews and skype. Six Malian females with a broad knowledge of Malian culture, three of whom still live in Mali and three of whom have immigrated to the UK, participated. These individuals were selected using purposive sampling.

After conducting semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to reflect on their experiences, thematic analysis was used to analyse interview transcripts. By coding the data, identifying the main areas of discussion was made possible. This resulted in three core themes: 'Educational influence', 'Whose choice is it?' and 'Jealousy' which was broken down into three subthemes: Jealousy in Urban Mali', 'Jealousy in Rural Mali' and 'Equality'. These themes highlight the experiences of the participants and the direction each interview took.

<b>KEY WORDS:</b>	POLYGyny	MALI	WOMEN	SKYPE	ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWING
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## **Introduction**

The focus of the study is to provide insight into polygyny within a Malian context through interviews with Malian women. This introduction will provide a cultural history of polygyny with psychological insight.

## **Cultural Psychology**

Cross-cultural psychology focuses its attention towards studying the similarities and differences of various cultures (Shiraev and Levy, 2016). Cultural psychology however, and the focus of this research, is concerned with exploring higher psychological functions of a specific culture, for instance, functions that require human will and ability to construct meaning (Valsiner, 2014). An important aspect of cultural psychology is understanding how social norms shape and influence the psyche, and allow individuals within certain culture to give their accounts as a valuable source of information (Valsiner, 2014). Cultural learning is proposed to be obtained through engaging in social interactions, a characteristic that defines human beings (Heine, 2010). The Ratchet effect posits that individuals learn cultural norms evolutionarily over time, for example, cultural ideas are learned and modified which are then taught to others (Heine, 2010). The ambiguity of defining boundaries between culture and religion is a constant debate in literature. However, argued is the entwined nature of both culture and religion and how it allows research to understand and depict the essence of a society's cultural construct (Beyers, 2017), one could therefore propose 'religion is a cultural expression' (Boyer, 2001: 47).

## **Social Norms and Values**

A world devoid of social norms and values would lack structure, morals and reason, which are the emulsifying fundamentals that set boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour (Realo et al., 2014). Contemporary cultural psychologists draw upon anthropological and evolutionary theory through research such as ethnography in order to gain a richer understanding of cultural models of behaviour and what that means for cultures throughout the world (Realo et al., 2014).

## **Marriage Practises/Partner Preference**

Various cultures have different rules in terms of marriage. For example, some Asian cultures believe polygyny is a respected way of life, by showing economic status (Lang and Smart, 2002). Whereas, western cultures abhor the practise of polygyny and believe monogamy is most respected (McDougall, 2016). Mostly researched by anthropologists, partner preference can be viewed from two perspectives.

Universalists tend to look at similarities in human behaviour across cultures (Stevenson, 2009) for example, in terms of partner preference, sexual attraction is well researched to be biologically determined (Simard, 2014). Whereas relativists dig deeper into understanding the cultural meaning (Stevenson, 2009), and propose finding a partner cannot be generalised, in other words understanding that partner preference may be culturally constructed (Al-Darmaki et al., 2014).

The institution of marriage is depicted as being a romantic and intimate relationship sustained by love (Wiik et al., 2010). Cultural western stereotypes suggest the value

of love is a precondition of marriage (Burgess and Wallin, 1953), this notion has been reaffirmed through empirical research indicating that love is presumed a necessary element for a healthy union between two individuals (Sprecher and Hatfield, 2015). Simpson et al's (1986) study looked at the importance of love in America and found 80% of male and female participants, despite a person having all desired qualities, would not marry if the feeling of love was not present. On the other hand, Nyrop (1985) found in other cultures love was seen to be a detrimental factor within a marriage. In India for example, an intimate loving attachment is considered a threat to the family structure due to the risk it poses when making practical decisions to prosper the familial unit (Nyrop, 1985).

### **History of Polygyny in Islam**

Polygyny, a man having plural wives (Bove et al., 2014), is the most practised form of polygamy and continues to be well-practised in many African and Asian countries (Cook, 2007). Anthropologists commonly refer to this practise in literature as 'polygamy', the traditional term used for more than one spouse, regardless of gender (Slonim-Nevo and Al-Krenawi, 2006). However, for the purpose of this study I will use the specific terminology.

Although polygyny is practised by various cultures, it is most prominent within the Islamic population (Heinemann et al., 2016). Historically, the frequency of tribal wars in pre-Islamic Arabia meant polygyny was a common practise with no limitation to number of wives (Jawad, 1991). However the arrival of Islam redefined the concept of polygyny by limiting number of wives to four, and introducing conditions under which additional wives should be sought (Jawad, 1991). The Qur'an's explanation of polygyny has been arguably misinterpreted over the years (Jawad, 1991). Whilst



some explanations state a man may only take additional wives should he have the appropriate economic resources to care for each equally and fairly (Slonim-Nevo and Al-Krenawi, 2006) others argue the conditions for plural wives centre upon lack of fertility as opposed to wealth (Dissa, 2016). Additionally, a passage overlooked by many cultures states monogamous marriage is most ideal (Dissa, 2016), as such, disparities of cultural Qur'anic interpretation over the years has debatably led to male bias in terms of adapting conditions to suit patriarchal societies (Ariany, 2013).

### **Educational Influence**

Poverty is prevalent within many areas of Africa, particularly the West. Within these countries, polygyny is well practised, predominantly within uneducated populations (Fenske, 2015). It could therefore be proposed that female empowerment and monogamy are aided by the increase of a good education (Doepke et al, 2012), which may permit females to seek more self-fulfilling marriages. However, Fenske's (2015) research challenged this concept after conducting a study with a large sample of females in over 34 countries to revise the question of whether increasing education has shown to impact the volume of Polygyny in West Africa. Whilst her study found colonial and missionary education to have historically reduced polygyny, her research found recent development of female modern-day education had no effect on polygyny rates, possibly due to the content being much more geared towards Islamic teaching than it once was.

### **Polygyny in Mali**

West Africans celebrate polygyny, not just as a marriage practise but as part of their value system (Hayase and Liaw, 2007). Urbanisation has caused marriage practises

to change somewhat in terms of adapting attitudes towards freedom of choice (Gaydosh, 2015). This however, is an extremely new development within Malian society and depends greatly on family's tradition of cultural values (Gaydosh, 2015). Geographical location should be taken into account as although the rate of plural marriage is slowly decreasing in Mali, polygyny is still regarded a necessity within rural communities (Akresh et al., 2016). Polygyny is particularly widespread in Malian farming lands, where a larger labour force, predominantly female, is needed and used as a tool to ensure economic stability for families (Dissa, 2016). Accordingly, certain cultures within rural Mali, such as Bambara and Sarakole, take pride in having many children due to their agility to farm and consequently maintain economic sustainability (Dissa, 2016).

### **Women and Polygyny**

Currently, polygyny research tends to focus on negative effects as opposed to its potential benefits. Co-wives either harmonise positively in their environment or conversely, acknowledge each other's coexistence, albeit within a rivalry milieu (Tabi et al, 2010). According to contemporary literature, polygyny as a marriage practise is more accepted by women in rural Mali (Dissa, 2016). Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1970) suggests, for individuals to be content with their lives certain needs must be met, beginning with basic survival. Once this is achieved, other needs such as social can be fulfilled (Tay and Diener 2011). Additionally, research proposes polygynous wives who work hard together communicate more, therefore strengthening their relationship (Madhavan, 2002). Thus, geographical location can be said to influence a woman's attitude towards polygyny, as working well with cowives ensures their family's needs are met (Dissa, 2016).

In Mali, the relationship and behaviours between co-wives can also be influenced by their cultural upbringing, in other words, the ethnic group they belong to (Madhavan, 2002). For example co-wives brought up within Bamanan culture are encouraged to work well together as this expectation increases their social status. However, co-wives within the Fulbe culture experience rivalry and jealousy, commonly towards the youngest wife (Madhavan, 2002). Harris (2003) refers to the Social-Cognitive Theory of jealousy as the process by which romantic and sexual jealousy can manifest from the perception of threat imposed by a rival, a common outcome of polygyny (Madhavan, 2002). Cognitive evaluation centres this theory and how it can elicit an emotional reaction towards a threat (Harris, 2003). Therefore, although Madhavan's (2002) research explains the cultural reasoning behind cowife cooperation in certain tribes, it fails to explore the instinctiveness of emotional jealousy and its effect on behaviour (Kizildag and Yildirim, 2017). However, Shepard's (2012) study of exploring mental health issues in polygynous women recognised patterns of low self-esteem, anxiety and depression amongst the co-wife community, potentially identifying issues faced by these women, though depending on their upbringing, may be unvoiced.

### **Research Aims and Objectives**

The literature above has provided context into the history and cultural aspect of polygyny. Therefore, the main aim of this research was to explore how Malian women construct meaning towards the concept of polygyny as a marriage practise. This research took an inter-disciplinary approach whereby both anthropological and psychological frameworks applied. Through ethnographic semi-structured interviews

participants were asked to discuss their thoughts and views, and the meaning they attach to the representation of women in a polygynous marriage.

## **Methodology**

### **Research context**

Mali is one of the world's fastest developing countries, with a growing population approaching 19 million (Worldometers, 2018). Since gaining independence in 1960, Mali's social and political progression has advanced, particularly over the last decade, in the way of changing attitudes within society (Kone, 2017). Such attitudes refer to the advancement of female educational and workplace movement, technology and industrialisation (Kone, 2017). Despite Mali being a considerably poor country, it is one of Africa's richest due to its natural mineral resources (Smyth, 2016), gold mining institutes in particular have played a significant role in Mali's urbanisation process over the last decade (Traore, 2016).

Life expectancy in Mali is poor compared to western civilisation, with men averaging just 51 years and 53 years for women, a common cause being tropical diseases such as Malaria and Cholera (Smyth, 2016). Polygyny rates for females aged between 12 and 60 years are relatively high at 41.8% (Dissa, 2016) with the current average marital age of 19 (Whitehouse, 2016). In terms of education, Mali has one of the worst literacy rates across the globe, predominantly within the female population (Thomas, 2015). This is a result of traditional views suggesting females to be best suited in domestic settings, of which, education is not necessary (Thomas, 2015).

Furthermore, within their research, Gottlieb (2016) found especially in rural Mali, where gender norms are strongest, women are less accepted within the public sphere as opposed to more urbanised communities.

### **The researcher**

The researcher was able to gain access to this particular population as their time spent in Mali from 2012 to 2015 allowed them to interact and learn respected cultural values and norms.

### **Design and Setting**

A qualitative research method was implicated in order to place emphasis upon individual experiences. Both skype and ethnographic interviews supported the data collection for this research. This allowed the researchers to observe and unearth meaning from participant's words and actions to gain deeper understanding into the desired topic of study (Ejimabo, 2015), a vital element that quantitative research is unable to capture (Stenbacka, 2001). Conducting interviews enabled the researcher to gain rich, holistic data that captures the experiences of the participants using their own words (Yilmaz, 2013). Creating a safe, coherent and trusting relationship between a researcher and their participant was crucial in order for a quality, worthwhile and detailed interview. Such a personal connection is built through successful rapport and trust to allow the participant to share their intimate thoughts and feelings towards a certain topic (Seitz, 2015).

Although semi-structured interviews were conducted, participants were encouraged to speak freely when answering in order for the researcher to gain a holistic and

unbiased response. This permitted the researcher to follow up on information that may not have been prompted by the question presented (Sullivan et al., 2012). To achieve this a broad interview schedule (Appendix 1) was created with possible areas of interest/importance constructed around prior literature.

## **Skype**

The interviews using Skype took place when the participants were in their own homes at a time they were able to speak freely and openly. This provided a quieter environment and allowed them to speak freely and openly in regards to the research question. Given the potentially sensitive information shared, the researcher conducted interviews using already established relationships with women in Mali and the UK.

The use of video-based software such as skype has created new possibilities in the realm of facilitating new methods of communication between countries and cultures in order to conduct fresh and meticulous interviews (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013). Being an undergraduate research paper, Skype enabled this study to carefully select appropriate participants, whilst at the same time maintained the richness of data needed for this study (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013), without the necessity of travel. Other benefits skype offers (which are applicable to this study) are enabling more opportunity in terms of geographical access, and is less disruptive in terms of scheduling and carrying out the interview (Seitz, 2016). Thus, skype is argued to be a promising research method, allowing for advantageous methodological potential and offers versatility for researchers to access the ideal research sample (O'Connor et al., 2008, Madge, 2010). Skype was chosen as one of the research methods for the present study as a promising method of communication which was convenient,

allowed for real time interaction, and was easy to work around schedules. Thus, the researcher was able to conduct interviews with participants who were suitable to the research question as opposed to simply available.

### ***Ethnographic Interviewing***

The ethnographic approach was designed in order to enhance qualitative interviewing using the cultural psychological framework (Valsiner, 2014) as a way of understanding human behaviours and social lives within a given culture (Ejimabo, 2015). Ethnographic interviewing however, whilst still applying cultural psychology, focuses on understanding human cultures from the viewpoint of individuals who have learned them (Spradley, 2016). In other words, “to grasp the native’s point of view, in relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world” (Malinowski, 1922:25). The intention of carrying out ethnographic interviews for the current study was to seek cultural information using an informal, friendly conversational style with the participants. Not only did this help them feel at ease by creating an easy dialogue, it allowed the interview to be reflexive (Spradley, 2016). Adopting an ethnographic interviewing style to one-to-one interviews made for a richer cultural environment as the participants were able to refer to photos and objects within their houses which added richer context to their stories. Hockey (2002) exemplifies a contemporary view of ethnographic research and interviewing which embraces interview-based studies opposed to participant observation, as a culturally appropriate form of participatory research.

A growing body of literature is exploring the effectiveness of conducting multiple methods of interviewing and their value in producing plentiful and meaningful

research by enabling access to an appropriate sample (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013).

### ***Data Analysis***

Given the researcher's desire of exploring the female Malian perspective of polygyny through their own meaningful experiences, the current research focussed on a social constructionist perspective (Burr, 2003). Common in cultural psychology, the ontological perspective of the researcher was relativism, which enabled the truth to be created by experiences of the participants (Chen et al., 2014). Thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). TA is a widely used tool in qualitative research by analysing data through uncovering meaning within transcripts (Guest et al., 2012). Identifying meaning from the participants' experiences revealed implicit and explicit ideas generated from the interviews, referred to as themes (Guest et al., 2012). Carefully selected themes were produced by noting and coding recurring and distinctive aspects of participants' responses which were interesting and relevant to the research question (King and Horrock, 2010). 'Thematic analysis conducted within a constructionist framework seeks to theorise socio-cultural contexts and structural conditions that enable the individual accounts that are provided' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:14). Given the current study's focus on a social constructionist viewpoint, this methodology was most appropriate.

### **Participants**

This research study was conducted using qualitative one-on-one, semi-structured ethnographic and skype interviews with three women who were still living in Mali and



participated using Skype as a contemporary form of communication and three of whom had immigrated to the UK, conducted using ethnographic interviewing.

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

Participants had to be female and Malian with a strong cultural knowledge of polygyny, however have no current or previous involvement in plural marriage.

### **Procedure**

Six interviews were conducted, three held in the participant's houses and three over skype. Each gave the researcher the chance to observe the participants' in a home environment and interacting with their children. Once comfortable, each participant took part in a one-to-one interview with the researcher lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour, using a voice recorder in order to collect accurate information. After gaining consent from participants, interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (See appendix 2) (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During which, data was coded line by line and manually sorted into 18 broad themes, originally created through similar responses and frequency of use. These were then narrowed down into core themes and if applicable, sub-themes. The core themes were selected if the topic had been mentioned frequently or proved interesting to the research question.

### **Ethics**

In order to abide by ethical guidelines, each participant was briefed and gave both verbal and written consent prior to taking part (Reynolds et al., 1997) (see appendix

1). Although confidentiality could not be assured due to potential quotes used as support for analysis, to protect the anonymity of the participants, each were provided with a pseudonym and no identifying features were disclosed.

## **Analysis/Discussion**

This study sought to gain further insight into the perspectives of Malian women on the practise of polygyny through exploring their own experiences and understanding. Thematic analysis enabled the data set to be constructed into three core themes: 'Jealousy' experienced in plural marriages, 'educational influence', and 'whose choice is it' each of these themes will be discussed along with any subthemes that are applicable.

### **Jealously**

Following previous literature, an unsurprising theme found was the jealousy experienced by polygynous wives. This theme has been broken down into three subthemes: Jealousy in Rural Mali, Jealousy in Urban Mali and Equality. From the interviews, it was possible to gain an understanding of the prevalence of jealousy, its triggers and how it is constructed within urban and rural contexts.

#### ***Jealousy in Urban Mali***

Jealousy, closely linked with envy, is more prevalent within the cities in Mali. Having wider resources and fewer responsibilities, with regards to survival, has made favouritism amongst sister-wives easier for their husband to express.

*“In the city, there’s more confrontation because women, they try to defend themselves more because it’s easier for the man to show he has a favourite [...] for example he will buy more material for the dress for one and not the others [...] my cousin was the favourite of three wives and she made it known [...] one day when she went to draw water from the well, she had a baby on her back and as she leaned forward one of the wives pushed her in the back to fall into the well because if they kill her then all their problems are gone”*

*(Oumou: L142-151)*

*“things are very different in the cities, the one rule of conduct is competition, who’s going to win, who’s going to be the most loved, who’s going to be the husband’s favourite uhh the winner and winner isn’t the wife who is able to provide the more education for her kids, we mean the one who knows how to cook best, the one who dresses up better, the one who is better looking and maybe the one who provides a better sex life to her husband [...] But this is only true of women in cities, I don’t think the same can be said for women in rural Mali”*

*(Fanta: L315-322)*

*“[...] They found out their husband had married a third wife on the day of the wedding [...] Her two sister-wives hated her [third wife] because their husband loved her more [...] they tried many times to hurt her, curse her and make lies to their husband about her [...] even though he loved her more, she told me she hates her life”*

*(Fatoumata: L224-227)*

From the interviews, the idea of negative competition is almost presented as a luxury. An availability of time and resources allows wives to create animosity toward one another through competing “*who’s going to be the husband’s favourite*”. One major issue worth highlighting is how jealousy can become primitive in the way of viciousness “*if they kill her then all their problems are gone*”, and the extent to which cowives are willing to excel their feelings in the form of aggression.

### ***Jealously in Rural Mali***

Participants were particularly keen on discussing life outside of the capital, Bamako. Polygyny is proposed to be more prominent in rural living for multiple reasons. Agricultural living makes for a busy life and relies heavily on amicable relationships, without which would make survival tasks difficult to accomplish.

*“It’s [polygyny] more widespread in the countryside because there are more tasks, collecting water, firewood, umm the harvests, so the need for polygamy is greater because they’re actually doing the work. The man takes more wives to share the workload whereas in the city, it’s not the same task-based approach [...] Erm survival is greater in the countryside because you don’t have electricity so you need wood and water to survive[...] so women in the countryside don’t have the time to be jealous”*

*(Oumou: L132-138)*

*“[...] in the rural suburb areas speaking to women’s groups who are still walking miles to access water, who are still fetching for wood to come cook dinner for the families who have no access to electricity, no roads, no nothing [...] laundry only gets done when the stream is there, it usually dries up from*

*February to June [...] at the same time, your husband is doing one thing, getting food [...] the women have to work well together because they cannot rely on their husband, this helps their relationships”*

*(Fanta: 254-263)*

Possibly the least invoked portrayal of cowives is the notion that cooperation and amicability can be achieved (Halsted, 2017). However, agricultural living and working, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa is argued to be significantly more labour-intensive than that of city living, due to lack of resources and droughts (Ellis, 2000), thus the more workers within a household means better living (Goodrich, 2001). As highlighted within Oumou’s interview, *“Man takes more wives to share the workload”*, which suggest that sister-wives are obligated to work well together in order to succeed in fulfilling daily survival chores.

### ***Equality***

A somewhat overlooked condition of polygyny within the Qur’an is the equal treatment of plural wives. Equality plays a vital role within polygynous marriages due to unfair treatment leading to jealousy amongst cowives, as previously explained.

*“My aunt and her sister-wife [...] are very close [...] when their husband died, they moved and lived together [...] They both loved their husband [...] they told me that their husband respected them a great deal, he respected them as women, he respected them as mothers and he was good to them, he took care of them equally and it was a full partnership”*

*(Daoule: L238-245)*

The positive relationship between sister-wives seems to resonate in the “respect” their husband shares for them, “*he took care of them equally and it was a full partnership*”. The phrase “full partnership” indicates the husband and both wives had a unified marriage, a likely predictor of why the wives were “very close”.

*“I met a women who was married for nineteen years and one day her husband came home with a second wife [...] that poor woman was just neglected and left out [...] he stopped giving her money for daily food, he stopped paying her children’s education anymore, he wouldn’t buy clothes for them even at Ramadan or Eid and the second one, the new wife was showered with gifts. It was heart-breaking”*

*(Miriam: L120-127)*

The above excerpt refers to inequality from a contrasting viewpoint of plural marriage. The unfair treatment of cowives is understandably a valid cause of jealousy. By favouring one wife “*the new wife was showered with gifts*”, has the power to create hostility between wives, the extent to which is showed in previous analysis.

## **Discussion**

Jealousy is a common and somewhat worrying issue in Mali, more so in urban living. Within Urban Mali, given the access to certain resources, intensive labour is not a necessity in daily living. City living also means favouritism can be easily shown, commonly through gifts, “*he will buy more material for the dress for one and not the others*”. As seen from Fatoumata’s interview, the youngest wife was favoured by the husband which led to the first and second wives allowing their hatred to take form of

malevolent behaviours “*they tried many times to hurt her*”. This supports evidence from Madhavan (2002) which suggests conflict arises when the husband favours the youngest wife. Surprisingly, often it is the preferred wife who experiences feelings of isolation (Shepard, 2012), as is apparent from Fatoumata’s interview “*she hates her life*”. Exclusion is therefore proposed a common contributor towards psychological distress (Patil, 2008), which, as highlighted earlier (Shepard, 2012) is a common amongst the co-wife community.

Conversely, living in rural Mali, women are faced with adverse realities such as “*walking miles to access water*”, which have a control over how they interact with one another. This parallels Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory (1970), in that the participant expressed the importance of daily endurance chores needed for survival. The findings from Fanta’s interview that suggests polygynous women who work hard together “*helps their relationships*”, is in keeping with previous research positing that cowives who share the same experiences such as domestic chores have better relationships, due to the increase of communication (Madhavan, 2002). A large predictor of jealousy is the location in which plural families live. As highlighted from the interviews and previous literature (Dissa, 2016), Mali has a strong female dominance in agricultural work, which, in order to carry out, relies upon work ethic and dependence of strong relationships. Larger families benefit in rural living by enabling the volume of workload to be shared. Thus, the need for Sister-wife cooperation is a vital element in order to meet the survival needs of the family unit. This however, does not take into account whether the wives feel jealous, it simply explains they cannot afford to express their jealousy. Moreover, due to lack of resources, increased cowife cooperation in rural Mali could be explained by having a

lack of dependence on husbands for material support and more dependence on sister-wives to fulfil daily survival tasks (Jankowiak et al., 2005).

Important to note is the husband's role in instrumenting conflict between his wives by showing bias through affection and gifts. The husband's treatment of his wives makes an impact on sister-wife relationships and is a key element to creating a harmonious dynamic. The Qur'an, as previously discussed (Jawad, 1991) exemplifies the importance of equal treatment amongst wives, however also mentioned, cultural interpretations have created an ambiguous framework to family structure (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000; Dissa, 2016). As seen through the analysis, both examples of fair and unfair treatment were highlighted, which had drastic effects on co-wife cooperation.

### **Educational Influence**

Giving young women the right to an education has begun to redefine the female gender role in Malian society. However, polygyny creates a cycle whereby girls are removed from school in order to become wives and mothers, therefore cannot get a job and become reliant on husbands for financial aid.

*“Mali is a very uneducated country, most polygamous women are from very poor families [...] after seeing their periods, because back then the mind set was once you daughter is able to become a mother, you know, the sooner you marry her the better [...] Many people don't have access to school, it's unreachable for them [...] education has improved for girls in Mali in the last few years [...] but the road is still long, were only talking about a very small percentage of women”*



(Fanta: L302-313)

*“Malian girls are getting better educations now that we did [...] we even have a female Mayor now[...] even girls who go to school are at risk of being put into a marriage with other wives. It’s the culture they’re born into [...] it depends a lot on the parents [...] the more educated the family, the more chance a girl has of choosing her own husband and I’m telling you now it won’t involve other wives”*

(Cici: L297-302)

Responses like these seem to suggest the idea that schooling is a desirable, yet, for most “*unreachable*” concept. Moreover, a lack of education and poverty seem to be the most common trait within polygynous women “*most polygamous women are from very poor families*”, this supports previous literature (Fenske, 2015) suggesting that poverty is a leading cause of uneducated polygamous women. Whilst there are existing theories that suggest polygyny will disintegrate with higher education rates (Gould et al., 2008), others, discussed earlier (Fenske, 2015), remain hesitant of its impact, as highlighted within the current study. Although the participants are aware education in modern day Mali is improving for girls “*Malian girls are getting better educations now that we did*”, they are equally mindful that this does not necessarily mean they won’t be “*at risk of being put into a marriage with other wives*”. While certain aspects of Mali, such as education are adapting to the changing world, and encouraging female presence “*we even have a female Mayor now*”, other traditional familistic norms, such as polygyny remain dominant. Thus changing marital practises seem only possible if acclimatising attitudes are first accomplished (Gubernskaya, 2010).

A somewhat worrying aspect of Malian culture seems to resonate in the idea that as soon as a girl shows physical signs of ability to conceive, she is therefore perceived ready to take on adult experiences. Fanta's words "the sooner you marry her the better" were indicative of the fact that a girl who has a child before marriage will be a burden to her parents (Gage-Brandon and Meekers, 1993), thus marrying her young will ensure no shame is brought upon the family. This highlights the fact that education is taken away from girls due to the cultural consensus that they are ready to become wives and mothers. Sargent and Cordell (2003), after conducting surveys across urban Mali, found fertility rates to be declining as secondary school education increases, due to females wanting to work, particularly in the capital, Bamako. However consequently this has encouraged polygyny due to husbands taking additional wives to birth children. Important to note are the cultural barriers present in terms of the limitations females still face in Mali "*It's the culture they're born into*" which amplifies the issue that even if women are educated, it is their culture that decides their futures.

A cultural comparison identified by Richter (2017) found highly educated polygynous wives in Utah, USA, seem to offer a counteracting, feminist argument whereby polygyny is entered into voluntarily and commended due to the benefits it offers wives. For example, enabling them to run their own businesses whilst able to rely on other wives for childcare support. In sum, whilst education seems to be improving for young girls in Mali, the percentage remains "small" and does not seem to eradicate polygynous marriages, thus for education to have full effect on women's rights, cultural attitudes must first be addressed.

### **Whose choice is it?**

Mali's traditional views towards cultural values means in many cases, becoming a cowife is not from personal choice. However, an ambiguity in choosing one's own path leaves the risk of being disowned by families and society.

*"Now it's how they're brought up, some (girls) will want to not do it (polygyny) but the family will disown them or society will disown them and then they are left with nothing. If they are educated sometimes they can escape and go somewhere else and just forget about everything behind them [...] for others it's a way of life that will give them comforts, maybe not love"*

*(Fatoumata: L83-86)*

*"If your parents want you to stay married to x, y and z and you see it otherwise [...] chances are you may be an outlaw, you may be victim of exclusion and for any Malian, whether a man or a woman, that feeling of being excluded or an outcast or abandoned by your parents, is worse than cancer, its worse than Ebola, it's a feeling that is so disgusting [...] but the belief seems to be that well it may be hard, it may not look promising in the beginning but God is in charge, once you get in, you'll figure it out"*

*(Fanta: L77-90)*

An overwhelming sense of parental control regarding polygyny was present within the interviews. The fact that girls who are expected to enter into a polygynous marriage, from a western perspective, could seem contemptable, yet, the way the participants spoke came across very matter of fact. For example, Fatoumata explained *"it's how they're brought up"*, in other words a cultural norm, and therefore expected to be an accepted part of life. However, went on to say *"some will not want*

*to do it*”, suggesting the idea that marriage for Malian children, mostly girls, is predetermined which leaves some with a sense of fear, should they contest the familial wishes “*the family will disown them*”. Cultural values, norms and practises can have forceful influences on behaviour, and are seen to be determinants of female wellbeing (Onuekwe and Okam, 2017). In Malian culture, respecting your parents is of upmost importance (Strassmann, 2017). Thus when Fanta discussed the risk of being “abandoned by your parents” by rejecting their authority to enter into a polygynous union, it was clear that the choice traditionally remains in the parents favour. Fanta’s emphatic description of parental rejection as being “*worse than cancer, it’s worse than Ebola, it’s a feeling that is so disgusting*” showed the extent to which Malian’s respect their family structure, however similarly to Fatoumata, also displays an essence of fear.

Building on earlier discussions of partner preference (Simpson et al., 1986; Nyrop, 1985), previous feminist studies on West African women have found them to address marriage in a pragmatic way by dismissing western ideals of romance (Oliver, 2018), this could suggest West African women understand the practicality of marriage and parallel their expectations to such. This is supported by previous literature (Akresh et al., 2016) by understanding polygyny is, for some, a realistic part of rural living.

Alongside this, spoken of was the essence of marrying for security “*it’s a way of life that will give them comforts*”, this almost gives the impression that women don’t have the luxury of choosing a partner for love, either choose or accept polygyny as a way of avoiding further poverty.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Whilst no attempt was made in this study to dismiss or condone the practise of polygyny, the outcome of interviews highlight mainly negative aspects. From the experiences of the participants, polygyny in Mali, although a long-standing cultural norm and useful in farming, from a female perspective is not an ideal way of life. It is clear from this study that, although improving, equality for Malian women in terms of marrying for love and choosing their educational path requires much needed development. Whilst this research provided holistic and supportive evidence to the female view of polygyny, future research could possibly benefit from exploring a comparison analysis between both Malian male and female perspectives, in an effort to understand Malian attitudes as a whole and possibly determine whether the male view is improving.

### **Limitations**

Due to the researcher facing ethical limitations towards travel, it was not possible to conduct the research in Mali which may have offered further insight into the cultural context of the interviews. Furthermore, the ability to interview polygynous women themselves may have offered additional first hand experiences.

### **Reflexive Analysis**

Using Willig's (2013) model of reflexive analysis, the following will reflect upon my experience of conducting this research and how it has broadened my cultural knowledge. Having lived in Mali for three years, I was able to experience its culture and practises myself. I found the way Malian women expressed themselves and the openness to which they discuss most topics admirable. I especially found the topic of polygyny fascinating, how some women accept it and others curse it. On deciding

my dissertation topic, I felt confident in my ability to explore my dormant questions, which immediately decided my qualitative research style. Having some areas of interest, I was keen to see if my participant's experiences followed patterns of previous literature. Therefore my semi-structured questions remained relatively broad, however encompassed the overall concept of the research question. These prompted the conversation to get started then allowed the women to bring in their own experiences/areas of interest.

Given my existing relationship with the participants, I was confident in conducting the face-to-face interviews, this made for a relaxed and well-flowing conversation (Mayall, 2000). Whereas, common in non-face-to-face interviews, I found myself feeling a little awkward at first with pauses and not being able to read their whole body language, as they are easier to judge in person (Seitz, 2015). However, I found myself becoming more comfortable and confident with each interview by leaving pauses to let the skype participants gather their thoughts. All interviews were surprisingly straight-forward and flowed nicely. I thoroughly enjoyed interviewing my participants and learning more about the Malian culture I hold so dearly. Additionally, a fortunate yet surprising aspect was how each interview offered the same direction in terms of content.

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